

RATING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COURSES OF STUDY

**A REPORT OF THE RESULTS SECURED FROM RATING NINE
THOUSAND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COURSES OF STUDY**

BY

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FOREWORD

THIS study is a response to an opportunity and a need. The opportunity consists in the resources of Teachers College pertaining to the curriculum of the public schools, and the need is voiced by school authorities the country over for information concerning the trend of instruction given by progressive teachers.

Our general library contains all the standard treatises; our textbook collection comprises practically all the books that have been used in American schools from Colonial days to the present time; through the International Institute we have assembled representative texts and teachers' helps from all the leading nations of Europe, the British Dominions, and South America. We now have on file some 9,000 courses of study received in reply to requests sent to state departments, teachers colleges, and normal schools, all cities of a population of 2,500 and over, every county in the United States, and many selected private schools. These materials, all accessible to our staff and students, create an opportunity and offer a challenge that may not be ignored.

The revision of school curricula is the most pressing problem in American education. Courses of study that have been patched up for a generation finally come to a point where a new dress is necessary. Meantime new ideas and ideals have come into prominence. Whereas a generation ago the object of schooling was individualistic and aristocratic, to-day it is nationalistic and democratic. Public schools are no longer conducted by parents in what they conceive to be the selfish interests of their own children. The enormous expansion of the school population in recent years and the corresponding increase in school costs inevitably place public education on a governmental basis. In a final analysis, the only aim of public education that will stand the test of local government in this country is one that puts the public good to the front. In popular terminology, the aim is good citizenship.

Equally significant from the teachers' viewpoint is the inquiring mind of the typical American child. Surrounded by a world grown vastly larger and more complex, and at the same time more intimate and knowable because of modern inventions, the American child comes to school filled with curiosity that must be satisfied. He wants to know many things that never bothered his parents at his age and

viii RATING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COURSES

that never found their way into school instruction in any past generation. The consequence is that our schools are not only crowded with children, but they are also crowded, past all belief of the layman, with possible materials of instruction that tax the wits of the best of teachers to cast into pedagogic form. The revision of school curricula is the pedagogical counterpart of traffic control of our highways in these days of automobile congestion; neither problem would have been presented if the world had stood still these past thirty years.

With the intent of doing our part in a task that is nation-wide, Teachers College established two years ago a Bureau of Curriculum Research. Three research associates, all of them well trained in scientific procedure and with a background of practical experience in public schools, were appointed on full time and given a staff of clerical workers. A committee of the faculties was designated to act in an advisory relation, and the coöperation of students was invited to forward the investigation. Altogether some thirty members of the staff and one hundred and twenty students have actively participated in the undertaking. The monograph herewith presented is the first of a series which may include, circumstances permitting, such studies as the following:

1. An analysis of selected courses of study representing good present practice, to determine general trends and tendencies, the overlapping between courses and repetition within courses; the best projects in various subjects; and the best material for drill in securing accuracy of knowledge.
2. A selected list of scientific studies made since 1910, with brief annotations of their content and applications to the curricula of elementary and secondary schools.
3. An outline of methods used in different communities for adapting to local conditions materials of instruction and methods of teaching.
4. An evaluation of junior and senior high school courses of study, following a procedure somewhat similar to that used in the study herewith reported. We now have 2,168 junior and senior high school courses of study on file.
5. A study of time allotments based on reports from 1,000 representative communities differing in size from the one-room rural school to the large city schools.

6. A study of content and arrangement of household arts and home economics in all grades from the elementary school to college.

We are frankly dealing with what school authorities set up as their standards of excellence. Their practices may fall short of their ideals, and possibly some of them practice better than they preach. It is certain, however, that the printed courses of study, supplemented by a digest of textbooks used, is the best available indication of what any particular school or school system aims to do. What is actually done depends upon things beyond the reach of printed instructions—upon the organization, management, and support of the school system, upon the morale of the staff and the quality of its training, and, not least, upon the type of pupils and the kind of homes from which they come.

In evaluating the courses of study under consideration, we have tried to eliminate the words “best” and “better.” Having set up certain standards which appeal to judges in whom we have confidence, we are content to compare their standards with what we find in the published courses of study. Our judges may not be “best,” and our judgments may be faulty; but such as they are, we submit them to the public for what they are worth. If they shall prove to be half as valuable to those who are trying to find their way through the most perplexing problem that teachers nowadays have to meet as they have to us who have made this study, the mission of our Bureau of Curriculum Research will be fully justified.

JAMES E. RUSSELL

July, 1926

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE APPLICATION OF JUDGED BEST PRESENT PRACTICE IN COURSE OF STUDY AND CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION	1
II. SETTING UP THE CRITERIA FOR RATING THE COURSES OF STUDY	6
III. A STUDY OF THE INDIVIDUAL JUDGES AND THEIR RATINGS	113
IV. SELECTING THOSE COURSES MOST NEARLY CONFORMING TO THE JUDGED BEST POINTS OF THE CRITERIA	137
V. SOME MAJOR TRENDS IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION AS INDICATED BY A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE SELECTED COURSES	157
VI. SOME NEEDED FURTHER STUDIES	169

TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
I. SUMMARY OF POINTS OF STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS AS NOTED IN 498 COURSES OF STUDY	8
II. DISTRIBUTION OF JUDGES ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE	113
III. DISTRIBUTION OF JUDGES ACCORDING TO KINDS OF POSITIONS HELD	114
IV. DISTRIBUTION OF JUDGES ACCORDING TO LOCATION OF POSITIONS HELD	116
V. EXTENT OF ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF THE JUDGES AS INDICATED BY DEGREES HELD	117
VI. COLLEGES AND NORMAL SCHOOLS ATTENDED DURING ACADEMIC YEARS	118
VII. COLLEGES AND NORMAL SCHOOLS ATTENDED DURING SUMMER SESSIONS	121
VIII. RANGE OF THE RATINGS ASSIGNED 100 CITY COURSES OF STUDY IN GEOGRAPHY	129
IX. SUMMARY OF CENTRAL TENDENCY IN THE RATINGS OF 100 CITY COURSES OF STUDY IN GEOGRAPHY BY 2, 3, 4, 5 AND 6 JUDGES RESPECTIVELY	130
X. SUMMARY OF VARIABILITY IN THE RATINGS OF 100 CITY COURSES OF STUDY IN GEOGRAPHY BY 2, 3, 4, 5 AND 6 JUDGES RESPECTIVELY	131
XI. RANGE OF THE RATINGS ASSIGNED 100 COUNTY COURSES OF STUDY IN LANGUAGE	131
XII. SUMMARY OF CENTRAL TENDENCY IN THE RATINGS OF 100 COUNTY COURSES OF STUDY IN LANGUAGE BY 2, 3, 4 AND 5 JUDGES RESPECTIVELY	132
XIII. SUMMARY OF VARIABILITY IN THE RATINGS OF 100 COUNTY COURSES OF STUDY IN LANGUAGE BY 2, 3, 4 AND 5 JUDGES RESPECTIVELY ..	132
XIV. SUMMARY TABLE OF THE NUMBER OF COURSES EVALUATED BY THE JUDGES	133
XV. RANGE OF JUDGES' RATINGS IN THE VARIOUS SUBJECT MATTER FIELDS	135
XVI. NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF COURSES RATED BY THREE JUDGES	138

TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE	PAGE
XVII. DISTRIBUTION OF COURSES IN SECTIONS X AND Y OF TABLE XVI, ACCORDING TO TYPE OF COURSE	139
XVIII. NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF REEVALUATED COURSES RATED "GOOD" OR ABOVE (BASED ON THE AVERAGE RATINGS OF FIVE JUDGMENTS)	140
XIX. TOTAL NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF COURSES RATED "GOOD" OR ABOVE	141
XX. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RANK ORDER RATING OF A SELECTED LIST OF COURSES BY TWO GROUPS OF JUDGES	143
XXI. NUMBER OF COURSES RATED "VERY GOOD" OR ABOVE	145
XXII. TOTAL NUMBER AND RANGE OF COURSES INCLUDED IN SELECTED LISTS	146
XXIII. RELATIVE EMPHASIS UPON VARIOUS PHASES OF COURSES OF STUDY AS INDICATED BY AN EXAMINATION OF SELECTED COURSES IN THE FIELD OF GEOGRAPHY	158
XXIV. NUMBER OF CORRELATIONS WITH OTHER SUBJECT MATTER FIELDS AS INDICATED IN SELECTED COURSES OF STUDY IN GEOGRAPHY ..	159
XXV. GRADE PLACEMENT OF UNITS OF GEOGRAPHY	161
XXVI. GRADE PLACEMENT OF TOPICS OF GEOGRAPHY	161

FIGURES

FIGURE	
1. GRADE PLACEMENT OF UNITS OF GEOGRAPHY	160
2. GRADE PLACEMENT OF TOPICS OF GEOGRAPHY	162

RATING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COURSES OF STUDY

CHAPTER I

THE APPLICATION OF JUDGED BEST PRESENT PRACTICE IN COURSE OF STUDY AND CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION

THAT the curriculum maker is confronted by a seemingly endless series of difficulties is a fact now universally recognized. So important and insistent is the task of curriculum construction that many and varied attacks have been made. Some of these have begun with an analysis of the activities of man, some have attempted to determine the social value of various subject matter units, others have made a study of children's experiences, while still others have endeavored to ascertain what should be taught the child by observing the predictions of those who seemingly think ahead and by translating their predictions into teaching units suitable to various ages and grades.

At first the student of curriculum problems is tempted to try to analyze life's desirable objectives. If there were only agreement as to what is desirable and then if this mythical something could be analyzed and translated into appropriate teaching units, this method of approach would probably be the correct one. It is possible that even yet some plan of securing relative agreement as to these desirable goals through properly guarded jury procedure may be the most sound initial step in solving curriculum problems. Recently there has been an attack predicated on the theory that human actions are chiefly controlled by emotionalized attitudes, and that these, therefore, should be most carefully studied. While almost any thoughtful student will admit that such emotionalized attitudes are controlling drives in human lives, and while undoubtedly a careful study of these can and should accomplish much, nevertheless they seem to be as elusive of analysis and control as the desirable objectives themselves.

The number and sincerity of the approaches to curriculum construction, both in research bureaus and in the field, indicate unquestionably the interest with which a solution of the problem is sought. Then, too, the fact that, contrasted with ten years ago, there are

but few thinkers claiming only one correct procedure indicates that we are in a period of intellectual open-mindedness in curriculum building. Few, if any, of the approaches have been without merit, and most of them have been productive of great good. It may be both fortunate and economical that a solution of the problem is being attempted from several points of view, for it is likely that some of these attempts will lead later into a common highway. Although the curriculum problem will be with us always, it is to be sincerely hoped that within the next ten years each of these approaches will be pressed as nearly to its logical conclusions as the baffling complexities of the issues involved will permit.

It is the feeling of those in charge of the Bureau of Curriculum Research that many of these approaches, although proper enough from the point of view of theoretical considerations and definitely needed in attempting ultimate solutions, are as yet too far from conditions in the schools themselves to be of an optimum amount of immediate service to those in the field. Often theories regarding curriculum construction seem so difficult of application, so complex, so different from present practice that only a negligible per cent of the most capable and adaptable teachers are able to profit from them except in an academic way. While it is highly desirable that our universities and colleges exert every effort to set up the highest possible ideals in curriculum making and approach them as nearly as the abilities of their instructors and research students will permit, nevertheless, with hundreds of thousands of children to be taught yearly in the American schools and with thousands of teachers to be trained, there seems to be a real need for a type of attack that will attempt to produce results which can be translated more or less immediately into units near enough to present practice not only to be understood by teachers in the field but also to be appropriated by them as a valuable "next step."

Even this is much easier said than done. Obviously, if an attempt is to be made to construct curriculum units sufficiently near to present practices to be understood and attempted, the actual status of the present practices themselves must first be determined. Probably the most accurate method of securing the facts would be to send a large number of curriculum workers into classrooms all over the country, although considerable error would unquestionably result unless the investigators were thoroughly trained so as to make their reports comparable. It is evident that this would be a most expensive and

tedious process. It was decided for the purpose of this study, therefore, that the most accurate immediately available picture of present practice could be obtained from an examination of courses of study.

Hence, letters were sent in July and October, 1924, and again in September, 1925, to state departments, to state teachers colleges and normal schools, to all cities in America with a population of 2,500 or more, to every county in the United States, and to a representative list of one hundred thirty private schools, asking for copies of curriculum or course of study materials, with the special request that new materials in mimeographed or typewritten form be included. As a result of these requests approximately nine thousand courses of study (counting as a separate course each separate treatment of the various elementary school subjects) were received and filed. Unfortunately, materials from a few of the best known demonstration and experimental schools are not included. There are also some undoubtedly good courses of study from cities and counties that were not available.¹ The fact, however, that as many as nine thousand pieces of curriculum material were examined makes it highly probable that a most significant cross section of printed descriptions of school work in grades kindergarten to six inclusive has been considered.

It would be folly to argue that the printed documents of school systems are exact descriptions of the actual teaching materials or practices, for in one community a small group of energetic and well trained teachers may have evolved a course of study that would measure high according to almost any modern criteria applied to it and yet the average quality of teaching materials in this community may be of very low grade, while in another situation splendid teaching may have been the rule but little of the material utilized may have found its way into typewritten, mimeographed, or printed form. It is probable, however, considering the emphasis now being placed on curriculum reconstruction programs the country over, that those communities where good teaching exists will sooner or later translate the teaching materials into courses of study in one form or another. The fact that courses of study have been made for many years and that the tendency of administrators is in the direction of expanding the program of construction rather than diminishing or

¹A special study and analysis will be made later of the materials from the different experimental schools as well as of any courses of study from cities and counties which are unique in organization or general character.

discontinuing it, would seem to indicate that superintendents have felt that the use made by teachers of courses of study has been sufficiently extensive and valuable to warrant making courses of study. While it is undoubtedly true that the most progressive teachers do not in many cases follow the printed course of study closely and that in their departure they probably add materials and practices which quite often are superior to those listed in courses of study, nevertheless it is believed that the majority of the school systems and teachers do not vary widely from the requirements of the printed course of study just as they do not deviate from textbooks. Therefore, if an attempt is to be made to present a comprehensive cross section of school materials and practices, it seems clear that one major element of that presentation should consist of a study of the printed documents placed in the hands of all types of teachers. There is no question, however, but that a careful study should be made, not only of the extent of the gap between actual teaching and that described in printed documents, but also of the methods and content materials of that small number of schools where many of the foremost features in education have been tried until they have passed beyond the experimental stage and become effective.

Assuming, then, that the examination of a large number of courses of study would result in the most accurate picture of present practice available, the next task was that of determining a method of properly analyzing this large amount of material so that courses of study on various levels of curriculum worth could be selected. The detailed criteria set up for this purpose together with the methods by which they were evolved will be described later.

Since none could deny that a tremendous improvement would be made in the work of the nation's schools if all the curriculum materials and teaching could be raised to the level of the best, it was next considered desirable to select carefully and to analyze those practices and materials which were chosen as most nearly conforming to the judged best points of the criteria.

Granting, however, that best present practice could be determined, analyzed, and properly adapted (the last a step that needs to be most carefully guarded), it would undoubtedly be wise for any community to supplement this first step by other curriculum constructing procedures, the contention here being that the most immediate and rapid improvement in curriculum reconstruction and development can probably be obtained by employing as a first step a pro-

cedure which utilizes better practice. The logical application of this procedure for any community would be:

First: To determine its own best present practice and make proper adaptations by critically evaluating such practice in the light of scientific studies dealing with determining curriculum materials and methods. Even in communities where the teaching practice ranks at the top of the scale, a procedure which would raise the level of this practice from its average to its own highest five per cent would be a valuable first step.

Second: To consider proper adaptations of the country's best practice. Doubtless the practice in no community will ever be best in all respects.

Third: To make the materials thus secured through an analysis of best present practice serve as indicators of and supplements to next steps.

Fourth: To test the value and effectiveness of materials through use.

In the remaining chapters of this monograph are described the methods by which outstanding present practice as found in courses of study was determined, and the methods of analyzing and interpreting these practices are briefly portrayed. The value of the procedure must necessarily await the results of the final analysis and adaptation of the materials. Even though it would never be argued that such a procedure should be employed as anything other than a "first step," unless best practice could be made to include all the best that can be gleaned from other curriculum constructing procedures, the ease and rapidity with which it can be employed coupled with the possibility of securing through it desirable applications of good curriculum construction theories, makes the approach valuable.

CHAPTER II

SETTING UP THE CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING THE COURSES OF STUDY

It is obvious that eight hundred to nine hundred courses of study in any one field of subject matter cannot be appraised accurately by the simple method, applicable to perhaps twenty or thirty, of having judges inspect the complete list of courses and then indicate the relative importance of each. The conclusion was therefore early apparent that no method of evaluation was valid concerning the rating of the courses of study which assumed that judges could hold in mind the entire group of courses and weigh each by balancing it specifically and directly in comparison with every other. Accordingly, the procedure adopted was to prepare a set of criteria for judging courses of study in each field of subject matter as well as a set for judging courses as a whole. While it must be admitted that even in such a scheme the judgments were not made on a purely objective basis, a study of the method by which the criteria were set up and a consideration of their application make it evident that they were of real assistance (1) in preventing judgments from being merely personal opinion by enabling the judges to set up for themselves guiding standards, and (2) in providing means whereby the judgments might be subjected to a scrutiny testing their consistency and validity.

These criteria were built in the following manner:

1. Four hundred ninety-eight courses of study (in the various subject matter fields) were rated by research students as to points of strength and weakness. These students received no instruction other than that each was to keep a record of each point which in his opinion constituted a strength or a weakness.

2. A study was made of the above ratings in which each point of strength and of weakness was tabulated and classified. In the aggregate 886 points of strength and 827 points of weakness were reported. The following are illustrative of the points receiving the highest frequency of mention as points of strength and weakness.

SETTING UP THE CRITERIA

7

POINTS OF STRENGTH

- "Clear statement of objectives."
- "Provisions for individual differences."
- "Suggestions under each subject gives teacher insight into value of subject matter and methods of teaching it."
- "Illustrative lessons given."
- "Material based on present conditions."
- "Well selected references."

POINTS OF WEAKNESS

- "Bare outline—refers to textbook pages only."
- "Formal type of work is the dominating background."
- "Little recognition of relative values."
- "Standards of attainment too high for the majority of children."
- "No provision for individual differences."
- "No principles or criteria given for judging teaching or its products."
- "Forced correlation."
- "Rhetorical helps only."

As may be noted from the above statements, the items tend to group under the following major headings:

- A. Recognition of Educational Objectives.
- B. What to Teach: Organization of Subject Matter.
- C. Recognition of and Adaptation to Pupils' Needs.
- D. Adaptation to Teachers' Needs.
- E. Course of Study Itself.
- F. Miscellaneous, including such items as Time Allotment and General Comment.

The distribution of the 1,713 points of strength and weakness under each of these headings may be found in Table I.

3. The third step was that of securing additional guidance in setting up criteria from standard references in each of the subject matter fields, and a study of standards set up for measuring textbooks such as those recorded in Spaulding, Maxwell, and others.¹

4. Tentative criteria in each of the subject matter fields were built, and critically reviewed by certain members of the Teachers College faculty.

5. The criteria were drafted in final form so as to include many diverse and opposing points of view.

Before the criteria themselves are presented, attention must be

¹ The writers wish to acknowledge the special help received from Spaulding's *Measuring Textbooks*. A number of the points suggested in the scales which are presented for measuring textbooks have been used in building the criteria.

RATING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COURSES

TABLE I
SUMMARY OF POINTS OF STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS
(As noted in 498 courses of study)

<i>I. General Points of Strength or Weakness</i>	<i>Strength</i>	<i>Weakness</i>
A. RECOGNITION OF EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES Statements regarding 1. Objectives, standards of attainment	84	75
B. WHAT TO TEACH: ORGANIZATION OF SUBJECT MATTER Statements regarding 1. Content 2. General Organization 3. Use of Textbooks	49 35 5 — 89	58 29 17 — 104
C. RECOGNITION OF AND ADAPTATION TO PUPILS' NEEDS Statements regarding 1. Recognition of the individual 2. Activities 3. Projects and problems 4. Use of tests and measurements	49 21 48 26 — 144	65 31 38 9 — 143
D. ADAPTATION TO TEACHERS' NEEDS Statements regarding 1. General helps for teacher 2. Method 3. Illustrative lessons 4. Reference materials for teacher 5. Reference materials for pupils	84 39 11 60 38 — 232	69 46 5 89 2 — 211
E. COURSE OF STUDY ITSELF Statements regarding 1. Mechanical make-up 2. Course of study as a whole	50 86 — 136	44 151 — 195
F. MISCELLANEOUS	35	14
Totals	720	742